

## 1. UNIVERSITIES ALONG THE CENTURIES

European Universities were born around 900 years ago; and even if they changed quite a lot with the flowing of the centuries, most of their characteristics survived the erosion of time so that they are still relatively easy to identify:

- Their classes of population remain divided into the professorial stratum, the corpus of students and the ensemble of non-teaching staff.
- Their objectives remain more or less the same: the concentration therein of all knowledge available at each time; the creation of new knowledge through speculative thinking and the critical analysis of theories, observed facts and experiments; the transmission of this knowledge to successive generations of students; the public validation of acquired learning, through the emission of degrees and certificates.
- Some other features of universities were somewhat less explicit: their capacity for freely expressing opinions and to influence the policy and the strategy of sovereigns; their *de facto* separation (in early times there was no question of calling it autonomy or independence) in respect to the State; their being driven by philosophical and moral references, rather than aiming at circumstantial profit and material dominance.

From this perspective, Universities were ethical institutions, even if they were highly selective, elitist and essentially non-democratic in their internal organisation and processes of operation.

From another point of view, there was a rather intensive interchange of ideas between the old universities:

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- The use of Latin that was, for centuries, the erudite common language in Europe, made possible mutual understanding across national borders;
- Scholars travelled from one country to another and were received as visiting professors in different universities, spreading their ideas and knowledge;
- Books published in Louvain, Paris, Bologna or Coimbra found their way to university library shelves in Prague, Krakow, Oxford, Uppsala and Heidelberg. They included prose, poetry and speculative essays; law, theology and philosophy (including the contents of astronomy, physics and chemistry), mathematics, history, geography and the natural sciences; and everything else, like how to ride horses, how to educate princes, how to work metals, how to deal with illness, how to save believers' souls.

## 2. THE MODERN AGE OF UNIVERSITIES

Many things remain of the olden times in modern universities: their objectives have not changed by much; old buildings, traditions and rituals, insignia and regalia, have in many cases survived the passing of time; and we can still find the same extreme hierarchy of academic positions and functions.

Meanwhile, scientific research appeared as one of the explicit functions of universities besides the teaching activity; and so much so that it became a major requisite for the successful progression in the teaching career.

On the other hand, Faculties and Institutes acquired some degree of autonomy, specialising in the different branches of Arts and Sciences. Another major change occurred by awarding university status to the applied sciences and technologies, formerly considered below the dignity of the so-called Fundamental Sciences. Post-graduate studies leading to doctoral degrees became an important part of universities' activity.

In Europe, financing the installation and the day-to-day operation of universities was recognised as a task for the State or the Church. In North America, a new trend was seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the creation of private universities based on grants and endowments given by local governments or by members of the civil society.

We can roughly state that in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, universities were generally recognised as having a high degree of scientific, pedagogic and organisational autonomy; and a somewhat lower one, in what respected administrative and financial aspects, naturally determined by requisites imposed by the sponsoring entity. In terms of volume and nature of their student population, they were small to medium-sized and included mostly students from the more privileged social and economic strata of the generic population.

Aiming at educating and training an elite of knowledgeable persons, designed to become high officials in the public administration as well as in private enterprises, in politics and in the most prestigious liberal professions, universities carried on the tradition of providing quality and excellence, as necessary requisites for the exercise of power and the creation of wealth in all fields of human activity.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN UNIVERSITY LIFE

In the aftermath of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, economic development soared in the more technology-oriented countries, creating both a huge market for specialised professions and an increase of expectations for the future of the younger generations. Agriculture, mining and the more physical and manual occupations in industry reduced their manpower needs; and the sector of services increased manifold, making it clear that higher education and specialised training would become more and more necessary for the future needs of society.

A higher political conscience of the generic population tended to overcome previous social barriers traditionally associated with the privileged access to the more prestigious and better-paid professions — hence, the demand of access to universities begun to increase sharply.

Governments tried to cope with this in various ways: by expanding the capacity of existing universities and by creating new ones; by launching a new model of higher education institution, not quite at university level but less expensive due to their shorter duration programmes; or by implementing *numerus clausus* and imposing more strict admission criteria.

This was, however, not enough. Universities were faced with the fact that it was no longer possible to remain small and elitist and that they had to convert into something like mass-production educational systems.

Not all universities have adjusted to this principle and many academic staff still consider this as unacceptable anathema. They will suffer the corresponding cultural shock until they begin to learn that change is both unavoidable and urgent.

Governments found it more and more difficult to deal with the need to foster a sharp increase of the annual intake of higher education students, as well as the overall capacity of higher education institutions, for this meant a huge increment of budgets allocated to universities. Meanwhile, competing priorities like sustaining the social security and the national health systems and fighting the social consequences of unemployment and poverty did not allow for any leeway in the allocation of national resources.

In some countries, higher education tuition fees were increased up to the level of actual per student capita costs, thus making easier for the State, in financial terms, to cope with the increase of the demand. Some other countries did not dare to come so far and imposed just moderate aggravations of fees, which did not solve the problem in full. In some other cases, the field was made open to the creation of private universities, (with stiff tuition fees, for they must be profit-oriented) thus alleviating the pressure on public universities and the burden on State budgets.

As a complement, State-supported universities were asked to find new resources, by providing special services to external entities: consultancy to organisations and enterprises, applied research for industry, studies for public administration, etc.

This was, however, still not enough. We recognise that, for achieving sustainable development, there is a need to increase visibly the higher education outputs so that at least one half of the active population would have some kind of advanced qualification. This leads, in most cases, to a situation of clear financial impossibility — unless more productive ways of achieving massification were to be found.

One of these ways was put into being by the creation of the U.K. Open University, in 1969. Designed to provide higher education to large masses of students and to achieve democratisation of access, it grew steadily into a very large system with complete credibility in academic terms, as well as before public opinion.

Many other such dedicated institutions, operating as single-mode distance learning systems, were created in Europe and in all regions of the world, with remarkable success. However, this type of university requires considerable initial investments to begin operating and governments now seem to be reluctant to create new such institutions.

#### 4. NEW WAYS IN UNIVERSITIES

Given the high institutional status and, sometimes, the century-long tradition of universities, they are not easily persuaded to reform their ways or to accept new principles of operation. Due to their high inertial mass, universities tend to oppose any change of methods and practices, whenever this is found to conflict with their culture. It is a culture based on the individual power of academics, sometimes thinking themselves as absolute kings in the sphere of their *cathedrae*. They also tend to reject any involvement or responsibility over financial and administrative matters, *ars gratia artis* and *scientia gratia scientiae* being their current motto. Rectors are supposed to exist mainly to worry about these issues and to find the appropriate solutions, leaving professors happily safe and alone for carrying on their important teaching and research duties.

Summing up, there is now a severe crisis impending on universities, which may put into jeopardy their own existence. Some awkward indicators point in this wrong direction:

- Most universities are not productive enough in their main function of producing qualified individuals for their insertion in the civil society. The ratio between the yearly successful output of graduates and the yearly student intake is too low; the average number of years spent in the university is visibly larger than the normalised duration of programmes;
- Many entrepreneurial organisations do not take any more for granted the quality and relevance of university diplomas and degrees, preferring to recruit new members of their staff by submitting candidates to ad hoc selection procedures, including examinations about their scientific and technical competence;
- Due to the same reasons, new corporate universities begun to appear, in view of taking in their own hands the training of their staff;
- The international value of degrees and diplomas has declined, mainly due to the impossibility of assessing, from afar, the credibility and honourability of so many different foreign teaching institution;
- This same problem is aggravated by the appearance, in many regions of the world, of a large number of private organisations claiming university status, whose certificates and diplomas may have a doubtful value.

One possible way out of this dilemma is the adoption, by otherwise conventional universities, of open and distance learning (ODL) methods in their teaching operations.

Taking into account that they have already most of the necessary technological infrastructures, as well as a corpus of qualified professors, the marginal cost of launching distance learning initiatives is comparatively low, and the capacity of the institution can be expanded visibly, without a proportional increase in operating costs.

This is the way chosen recently by a large number of universities worldwide, thus becoming dual-mode or mixed-mode ODL systems.

While this is not too complicated to achieve in material and organisational terms, there are some difficulties of cultural order to overcome. One of them relates to the role of the professor, who is supposed to become, first of all, an *author of learning content*. Moreover, professors are not keen about having someone else to interfere in their tasks; but this will happen of necessity, for instructional designers, producers, media directors and task managers will have to contribute as well to this end, within their respective fields of competence.

Professors are also not keen of having their students' results analysed and discussed, pedagogic strategies questioned, teaching and student support quality monitored at all times — but this must occur as a matter of routine procedure. Actually, in an ODL context, pedagogic competence is as much necessary as scientific prestige, and this is not usually the accepted rule in conventional universities.

## 5. NETWORKING

There are many advantages in inter-institutional co-operation in the field of ODL operation. Taking into account that the production of quality learning materials is a key issue in this field (but also, unfortunately, the most expensive part of the corresponding investments) it is obvious that sharing this task, its costs and the corresponding use of materials, creates synergies and reduces expenses, to everybody's advantage.

It takes, however, some cultural adjustments for a professor in a given institution to accept that a distinguished colleague from another institution will be given the responsibility of authoring his or her own course materials. From the same perspective, it is only fair that this same person will supervise the corresponding examinations, on behalf of both institutions, and this is even less palatable...

Networking, as all collaborative processes do, will require for each partner to relinquish some parcel of its own power, for the common benefit of the partnership. This is

difficult to achieve, and the more so that institutions are very reluctant to sacrifice even the smallest part of their sovereignty.

This is the reason why the best-working networks are based on strict parity of status, mutual trust and respect, close cultural affinities. Networks based upon national or regional common goal and strategies; capable of creating their own collective identity and sense of purpose are much more likely to succeed than those of highly heterogeneous nature do.

Nevertheless, even in the most favourable conditions, successful networking requires lots of effort, careful planning and a special sensitivity to inter-institutional and inter-personal relations, easily bruised or hurt. Advantages should be shared, but also difficulties; each partner must see other partners' interest with as much keen attention as their own.

## 6. MULTINATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION INITIATIVES

We must take as certain that the advances in ICT's and the new concept of Virtual University will contribute to the globalisation of education and training, through the application of ODL methods in transnational contexts.

Virtual universities are just distance-teaching systems designed so as to take full advantage of the intensive use of INTERNET in performing most ODL functions and tasks: the distribution of learning materials, students' access to bibliography, tutoring, providing students with support mechanisms, diffusing information and data. Due to the fact that these functionalities are independent of location and distance, they can easily be transposed to transnational operation.

Differences in language are no longer considered to be a major hurdle, English having become a sort of foreign vehicular language in high-level international relations. We may question the more serious problem of the cultural compatibility of the content of learning materials, which may render irrelevant the best-designed materials when used in the wrong cultural, social and even geographical context.

There is, however, a serious risk that "multinational" universities (we use the word between commas to establish its parallel with multinational enterprises) will in the future create their own "globalised culture" like it happens with Coca-Cola, Mac Donald's, Benneton and Microsoft, making their ways and mores accepted everywhere, despite local and national cultures and perhaps overcoming them.

## 7. HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE

In higher education as in any other field of human activity, the only way to win against external competition is to improve the quality and the attractiveness of the local products and services.

European higher education institutions have been well placed in the field, being in the past wholly respected in the internal as well as in the international scope. They are not, however, fully prepared to cope with the sharp increase in demand that is appearing everywhere; nor are they capable of assuring efficient lifelong education for all citizens of the Information Society.

There is a clear need for non-conventional ways of delivering quality education and training in Europe, so that its workforce remains well qualified and, hence, making national enterprises competitive enough in the international scene. Many ODL systems have meanwhile been created for this purpose, as single-mode, dual or mixed-mode systems; consortia, networks and alliances have been launched to increase synergies in this field. But we believe that all higher education systems in Europe have to contribute visibly in this effort of conceptual and methodological re-conversion, so as to assure the general and progressive increase of qualifications of its citizens.

European universities have a long tradition of quality and prestige, when using conventional methods; they now need to learn how to deal with new methods and approaches and to get used to working together, so that they increase their global capacity while conserving their quality, improve their image and win the challenge of the new millennium.